PRAYER IS FOR CHILDREN
Luke 11:5-13
November 25, 1979

John M Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Arnold Come, President of San Francisco Theological Seminary and a good theologian, tells a story about prayer that I find helpful. It is about a dynamic I thought was peculiar to me, a mark of my own spiritual inadequacy, or egotism, or something. I find it difficult to pray when someone surprises me with the request. I have spent some fairly uncomfortable moments frantically composing thoughts, arranging ideas, theology, syntax before I am "on".

I thought it was only me...and so I was delighted to hear Dr. Come tell about an incident which happened to him when he was a student at Princeton Seminary. A traveling evangelist who was visiting the school cornered Dr. Come and asked if he would come to his room in order to pray together. Dr. Come said he wasn't so hot about the idea, he was not from a praying family, in fact, said that the only praying outside of church he had ever heard was his father at meal time, and that only when there was company in the house. Well, he went and they got down on their knees and began and Dr. Come, from the perspective of the years analyzed what happened and what, I propose, happens to many of us in prayer. "I experienced what (Jewish philosopher) Martin Buber calls the 'eclipse of God'. As soon as we begin to think about praying God looms up in front of us, but as soon as we begin to pray we listen to what we are saying and God is eclipsed by our consciousness of our own praying. For most of us it is difficult to pray to God and not about God."

A recent survey of church people discovered that outside of worship there isn't much praying going on: that although most people thought it was a good idea, very few actually engaged in prayer, or even considered praying on a regular basis. I think there are some reasons. Donald Coggan, recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote about prayer: "God is so great: the universe is so huge and mysterious; life, suffering, death are so far beyond our comprehension. What is the point of our feeble little attempts at prayer, the broadcasts of tiny individuals in a great echoing vastness?...Most of us either relapse into mere formality or give it up altogether." (Great Words of the Christian Faith, p.109-110).

That's one reason - the vastness of the universe and the relative insignificance of the individual. The second is a little more serious and a little more difficult. It has to do with the very existence of God, and the relationship of God to His creation. A bumper sticker may announce with great confidence that "prayer changes things", but most people, I think, don't take that suggestion the least bit seriously. What things? If it does, why doesn't God answer me more clearly than He does? If prayer changes things, why in the world isn't God healing the people I'm praying for or feeding the hungry who are the objects of so much fervent prayer? Does He have to be persuaded to heal? Do we actually propose that whatever healing God can do is withheld from the person for whom no one is praying? Prayer, as an act or gratitude, at Thanksgiving can be ambiguous and often times is reduced to mere self-congratulation.

Ever since the rationalist philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant began to toy with the idea of cause and effect, prayer has had a bad press, and I would submit, a slightly tarnished reputation even among those who continue to do it.

And so to the text which, without embarassment or apology commands us to ask, seek, knock and then promises that God will give us what we need. The whole passage is in the setting of a request the disciples made to Jesus: "Lord, teach us how to pray". He gave them a model - what we call the Lord's Prayer - and then He told this oddly charming little story about a man awakened at midnight by his neighbor. Somehow the seriousness of our religion fails to see the humor in this story. I think He meant it to be funny, and it is, the more you think about it. Did you ever find yourself locked out of your own house and try to awaken one person inside without arousing theentire neighborhood?

It isn't a very sophisticated analogy, but what I think about every time I read this passage is the tag end of a television show my children used to watch called the Flintstones. Fred is locked out, and as he bellows "Wilma" in the night, the lights come on in his neighbors' homes, one at a time until the whole neighborhood is awakened.

A man was asleep. He would have been on his reed mat, on the floor, beside his children. Suddenly a knock at the door broke the silence. The children stirred; the man couldn't get to the door without stepping on a few and so in a stage whisper he called out, "Who is it? What do you want?" "It's me, Joe, next door! I want three loaves of bread." "You, what?" "Three loaves of bread; we have company." "You've got to be kidding! Its midnight. Come back in the morning." Silence. The man settles down on his mat. Again, the knock rings out. "Come on - help me out - just three loaves." Now the children are awake and his wife is getting angry, and so he gets up and gives his persistent neighbor what he wants.

The concluding story suggests that a father would not consider giving his son a scorpion instead of an egg. Fathers don't act like that. Even in the middle of the night a man will get out of bed and give his neighbor bread if the asking is persistent enough. So God will meet the needs of His children. Basis on Oriental Custom P3H/5

Please observe two things immediately. First, good fathers do not give their children everything they want. In fact, a case can be made that good parenting is a matter of not giving those things a child needs to earn, win or accomplish alone. The second observation is that even though the whole passage seems to be moving in the direction of "you will get what you want if you ask persistently enough", at the very last minute Jesus radically altered the conclusion. "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

What we want, that is to say, is not the issue. The issue is communion with God, and God giving Himself to us - which is, the text would maintain, our most fundamental need after all.

But in the meantime, while we have been accommodating our faith to rationalism, things really have been changing in the world of science. Using rather common bio-feedback techniques some people can raise their body temperature by thinking about dipping their hands into hot water. Some can slow their own pulse rate, all of which David Hume, with his cause and effect empiricism, said you could not do. Norman Cousins, in a now well known story, suspected that empirical medical science, which told him he could not get well, was not dealing with the whole of reality. And so, under the guidance of his physician, he learned to use laughter as a therapeutic technique, and got better. Albert Einstein, empiricist par excellence, repeatedly warned about the limitation of science alone to describe reality, and said on more than one occasion that mystery is the most profound and beautiful experience available to us. And in the arts, the New York Times announced two weeks ago, that metaphysics is suddenly very much "in". Religion is a fit and somewhat glamorous topic for the theater, poetry, films, art and music. On Broadway, the screen, in architecture and music religious topics and religious questions are experiencing a renaissance. You may not like Monty Python's movie but the significant thing is that it was made and people are seeing it. Bob Dylan has been born again, and not just on the charts, and Arlo Guthrie is now a devout Roman Catholic. If we are a secular society and if God is dead and religion irrelevant, someone better tell the artists about it. Shakespeare himself, set something of a stage with the celebrated line out of Hamlet,

> "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."
> (Act I, Scene 5, Line 96).

The fact is that we simply don't know as much as we thought we did about the fundamental nature of things. The comfortable rationalism of yesterday simply is not adequate. Shakespeare was right - there is more to reality than meets the eye. Religion ought always to remind us of that. Religion ought never to be irrational: in fact, we have quite enough of that in the world at the moment. And yet religion is equally irrelevant if it does not remind us that human reason is not the sole arbiter of truth. Good theology had always known its own limitations. Robert McAfee Brown observes that "There is something comic, if not downright absurd, about the claim that a human creature can penetrate the veil of holiness surrounding the transcendent God. Rule number one for every theologian ought to be, "Don't take yourself too seriously." (The Pseudonyms of God, p.22).

And the late Karl Barth, whose Church Dogmatics extended through twelve heavy volumes was never wiser than when he wrote..."The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about God in a volume of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh they say to one another, 'Look, here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes'..And they laugh about the men who write so much about Karl Barth instead of writing about the things he is writing about. Truly, the angels laugh!" (Ibid.,p.22).

There is more to the universe than is confirmed in any philosophy. And yet...and yet prayer cannot be merely a way to get what you want. A theology which proposes that God can be persuaded to love more, to heal more, to care more because several of His people are clamoring for His attention, is a theology in which I am not interested. The wisest of parents do not give their children everything they desire. The best of parents know how far away to hold the reward and the right combination of prodding, scolding and patient loving which will call out of the child the effort to accomplish the goal. Jesus said it best. No father would give a child a scorpion instead of an egg. It should go without saying that a good father doesn't give an egg either, if in giving it the child will be prevented from gaining the ability to get his own eggs.

What is prayer than? If it does not result in God doing what we ask Him to do, what is its effect and purpose? I'm not sure there are rational answers at all. I am sure there is more to life than what meets the eye. I am sure that things are different for me where I know someone cares enough to pray for me. From my own subjective experience I confess that I have felt stronger when I knew someone was praying for God to give me strength. Frederick Buechner helps me by observing that the person who prays for another is actually asking to become a channel, in some mysterious way, for God's love. God's love is present - always. The person who prays is asking God to use his prayer, his own love and concern, as a kind of channel for God's love to flow through to the person for whom he is praying.

I am helped by the Dutch Roman Catholic Henri Nouwen's reminder that prayer is not talking at or even to God, but practicing the awareness of His presence. A life of prayer, Houwen suggests, is not a lot of praying, but a lot of awareness. In fact, Nouwen suggests that our much talking actually gets in the way of real praying... "Thinking about my prayer, I realize how easily I make it into a little seminar with God... I am obviously still worried about the good grade." In a book about spiritual discipline Nouwen wrote what has become my favorite working definition of prayer: "Prayer," he wrote, "is an articulate way of being useless in the face of God." (The Living Reminder, p.52).

And Archbishop Coggan, in a similar vein: "Really to pray is to stand at attention in the presence of the king...and to be prepared to take orders from him." (Op.cit. p.110).

The purpose, then, is to listen, to be aware, to be open, to be in touch with God our Creator. The purpose is to learn about oneself, to discover resources in ourselves, to be available at least to new power, new resources from out of the mysterious center of life. The purpose is not to persuade God to act differently but to receive from Him the gift which He offers, namely; Himself. "Ask, seek, knock," Jesus commanded. "Not in idle curiosity, or selfishness, but out of intense need: you will receive God's gift of Himself." What Jesus was addressing was the deepest of all human need, the need that erupts in a desperate cry in the darkest and loneliest of hours - "Christ, it hurts! - O God, why did he have to die? - Lord, help me!" What He promised was then, when the situation is "knock-at-the-door-in-the-middle-of-the night-urgent" God will be there, and it will make a difference and somehow you'll get through it.

It is for children. If you prefer the constructs of Transactional Analysis, it is for the child in us. Children, after all, are still open to mystery and new discovery. Children have not yet fallen prey to the closed intellectual arrogance of adulthood which concludes that there are no more surprises: we know all there is to know. Children have not yet decided what is and what is not possible.

Children know how to be surprised and to receive unexpected gifts. They have not yet fallen victim to the unnecessary complexities of adulthood which always relates receiving with deserving, and if the deserving quotient has not yet been met, insists that indebtedness to the giver or guilt is the next logical step. Children don't have any trouble feeling grateful for an unexpected gift. In fact, children are so unself-conscious they are inclined simply to ask for what they want and to be happiest of all when we give them what we have to offer; namely, ourselves.

Children know how to trust. A child will put a hand in yours and walk beside you into the fires of hell without anxiety, fear or hesitation.

Prayer is not for the very wise, the knowing, the skeptical, better said, the very analytical. It is for children.

"Ask," Jesus said, "and it will be given...
Seek, and you will find.
Knock, and it will be opened to you."

Amen.

O God, in Your goodness You have been father and mother to us. In this season of Thanksgiving hear again the gratitude of Your children. Give us, O God, moments of quiet listening in the weeks ahead. Help us to know Your presence, to hear Your voice, and to experience again Your love for us: Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.